

## Might Not Be That Bad by thedisgruntledone

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**Summary:**

Mike knows that Will didn't like Eleven all that much at first, but now they're great friends. It should make him happy. It does make him happy. If only they'd include him on all the private conversations they've been having lately.

Only he's starting to worry if what they'd have to say would be anything he wants to hear.

## Might Not Be That Bad

### Author's Note:

This happens after "Hey, Jealousy" but it's not necessary you read that first.

Dustin likes to say that Mike is oblivious. It's mostly true; he tends to get wrapped up in his own world and forget that other people exist, and if he isn't told things outright then he doesn't really pay attention. The only real exception to this is Will. Mike has always paid a little more attention to Will than anyone else, mostly because he's always been smaller and more timid than his other friends, too easily singled out by bullies like Troy. Since he was taken to the Upside Down and the ensuing events Mike's kept an even closer watch on him. Not because he thinks that Will is weak – Mike thinks that he's so much stronger than anyone realizes, considering what he went through and survived – but because he's never been the type to say when something is wrong.

Part of looking out for him means keeping his mouth shut sometimes, though, so when he realized that Will didn't like El all that much he didn't say anything. He told himself that if he just gave it time then Will would come around. They were both great people; it was only natural that they would be friends.

He feels smug about it when he turns out to be right. After their initial rocky start Will and El have really taken to each other, and he's happy to see it. He is. He just sometimes wishes that they didn't like each other quite so much. They seem to have a connection that he is missing with both of them; they've both been inside the Upside Down, after all. They spend a lot of time with their heads bent close together, talking in low voices, and Mike has come upon more than one conversation only to have them suddenly quiet down. He doesn't want to pry, but El is *his* girlfriend, Will is *his* best friend, and he doesn't like being left out.

Years of watching Will has really turned into a habit, and now he starts to notice things that he didn't, before. Like even though Will hangs out with them more since he and El became friends, he still

isn't around as much as he used to be. Like that he doesn't talk much when he is around, unless it's with El. Like sometimes Mike will catch him looking over at them, Mike with his arm around El's shoulders or holding her hand, and his face will go strange. Sort of sad and angry at the same time. It never lasts long and he's never said anything, but Mike is starting to wonder if maybe the reason that Will avoided El for so long wasn't because he doesn't like her, but because he likes her too much.

Despite what his friends like to think, Mike is fully capable of keeping to himself. Of letting himself brood and worry and stew in his own head without saying anything. But he's never been in the practice of keeping things from Will, and so it isn't long before it bursts out of him.

"Do you like El?"

Will looks up from his book, brow furrowed. "Yes?" he says, sounding confused.

Mike shakes his head. "No, I mean do you *like* her?"

"No," Will shakes his head, looking horrified. "No. I don't-no. No."

Now Mike is a bit offended on El's behalf. "Well, why not? She's amazing, and pretty, and can move things with her mind. What's not to like?"

Will stares at him. "Do you *want* me to like her?" he asks.

"No! But it's not like she's awful or anything. *I* like her."

"Yeah," Will says, voice soft. "I know." He looks down at his book, then looks at Mike through his lashes. "It'd be pretty crappy of me to like your girlfriend, don't you think? Besides," he continues before Mike can answer, "she's like my sister. I'd like – I don't know – *you* before her."

Mike's stomach lurches and he feels weirdly light headed. He opens his mouth, not sure *what* he's going to say, and then he sees that Will is smiling. "Funny," he says, voice a bit high.

Will's smile fades. "Yeah, I thought so." He turns back to his book, and Mike lets the conversation go. He doesn't feel quite right; his chest is tight and heavy but he's also full of energy. He needs to move but doesn't want to get up; he drums his fingers on the table until Will kicks his chair and tells him to stop.

A few days later Will and El get to the cafeteria before any of them; they're sitting close together, heads bent forward, speaking in low tones. Will spots Mike over El's shoulder as he approaches; his face tightens for just a second before smoothing out. He says something to El then gets up, smiling at Mike as he pushes his chair in. "Be right back," he says, and is off.

Mike pushes Will's tray over and sits down in his seat. El raises her eyebrows. "He's coming back," she says, and Mike shrugs.

"There's room." He points to the spot on his other side, and El's eyebrows climb higher. Mike squirms for a second, then checks to see that none of the others are coming over before he asks, "What's going on with you two?"

El shakes her head. "Can't say," she says promptly. "Friends don't tell."

Mike bites at his lip. "Friends sometimes tell," he says, wheedling, "if it's really important."

"No," she says. "Will said." She takes his hand and squeezes it. "He'll tell. When he's ready."

Mike sighs. He still feels anxious. He no longer thinks that they might like each other as more than friends, but he can admit that he really, really doesn't like that Will is confiding in El instead of him.

Will doesn't say anything. Days go by, and the others start to catch on that something is up. Lucas asks him what's going on one day after school. They are watching will and El head towards them; they've stopped walking and El is holding Will's hand; her eyes are locked on his face as she speaks. Mike sees that but he's not bothered; he's more worried about how pale Will is, how tired he looks. Mike wonders if he's been sleeping.

“What?” he says when he realizes that the others are looking at him.

Lucas rolls his eyes. “I said, what’s up with those two?” he looks over at them and then back at Mike. “They’re not – I mean –“

“No,” the answer comes from Max, not Mike, and they all turn to look at her. She shrugs. “It’s nothing, you know, romantic or whatever. I heard them talking the other day; I think Will’s been having nightmares.” She glances pensively down the hall. “I get them too, sometimes. I bet it’s worse for them.”

They all nod at that. Nightmares are something that they’ve all had to get used to in the wake of their encounters with the Upside Down, and it stands to reason that Will and El have it worse than any of them. They’d been hurt the most, after all. Maybe especially Will. At least El had been able to fight back, to use her fear and her rage as a weapon. Will hadn’t been given that opportunity.

“I just wish he’d talk to us about it,” Dustin says, and Mike nods.

“Yeah, me too.”

El and Will have started walking towards them again, and everyone immediately pretends that they weren’t just talking about them. From the fixed way that El looks at them, Mike is pretty sure they fail. Will mostly looks at the ground, and up close it’s even more obvious that he hasn’t been sleeping. El is holding on to his arm, and it seems to Mike like she’s half-guiding, half-supporting him down the hall. Instead of demanding to know what is wrong - which is honestly all he really wants to do - Mike makes sure to distract the others with making plans for the weekend. El gives him a bright smile when he looks over at her, and after Will is safely in Jonathan’s car she whirls around and kisses him in front of everyone, ignoring the catcalls and jeers it receives. She’s in the car before Mike can really process what has just happened, but it takes his mind fully off of Will for the first time in a while.

Later that day, Mike is in the basement. He’s supposed to be doing his homework and working on a new campaign – even though they don’t play D&D every weekend anymore they still play occasionally, and Mike wants the next time to be great – but really he’s thinking

about El kissing him. He hadn't been aiming for such a thing by keeping the others' attention off of Will, but he couldn't say that it wasn't a nice result, either. He grins a bit to himself, then frowns. The kiss had been nice, but his thoughts can't help but turn back to Will. Mike makes a decision. If Will doesn't open up to him by the end of the week, Mike will have to demand some answers. He can't watch Will fall apart without trying to help.

"Mike?" as if conjured by his thoughts, Will's voice crackles out from the walkie that still sits in El's old fort. "You there? Over."

Mike nearly falls out of his seat. He practically races to the walkie so that he can answer. "I'm here," he says. "What's up?"

There's a long pause. When Will speaks, his voice is unsure. "No one's home right now so I thought I'd come over for a while. Is...is that okay?"

"Of course it is," Mike says quickly. He doesn't actually know if it's okay, but he thinks that it will be. His parents like Will, and ever since he returned from being "lost", they've been mostly okay with him coming by when there's no one at his place, so long as Ms. Byers knows where he is. "You'll call your mom and tell her you're coming over, right?"

"Yeah. See you in a bit. Over and out."

The walkie crackles as he shuts it off, and Mike runs upstairs to tell his mom that they'll have company for dinner. As expected, she says it's fine, and then all Mike has to do is wait.

He finds himself feeling strangely nervous. He wonders if Will is going to tell him what's been going on with him, and realizes suddenly that this is the first time he's come by on his own in weeks. El has come over by herself quite a bit, and they've come over together or with the others, but it hasn't been just Will and him since El came back. For some reason that makes him even more nervous, and he's fidgety and restless until he hears the knock on the door.

They head down to the basement, Mike babbling about the campaign he's planning to cover up his weird attack of nerves.

“And I don’t want to give anything away, you know, because then it won’t be a surprise, but let’s just say that even the good choice is –“

“It’s not just nightmares.”

It bursts out of Will’s mouth so fast that it almost sounds like one word. *Snotjusnighmare*. Mike closes his mouth so fast his teeth click together. Will looks like he’s going to be sick. His face is pale and kind of sweaty, and he’s shaking.

“Sit down,” Mike says, and leads him over to the couch. He sits next to him, close enough that their knees brush, and asks, “What do you mean?”

Will takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. “What I’ve been talking to El about. It’s not just nightmares. Not anymore.” He swallows hard. “I’ve been going back there. Back to the Upside Down. Just like before.”

“But you weren’t going back before,” Mike says. “You brought a piece of it with you, that’s why-“

“That’s what I thought, too. But it’s not like that anymore. Ever since El closed the gate I’ve really been going back. It mostly happens when I sleep, but not always. Sometimes I go back when I’m awake, too.” His eyes are wide and terrified. “I think...I think that there’s a part of me that’s still there, and the Upside Down is trying to use it. Trying to turn *me* into a gate.”

Mike shakes his head. “Will, that’s –“

Will slides away from him on the couch. “You don’t believe me? Fine; watch this.” He closes his eyes, frowning. Nothing happens for a moment, and then he *flickers*, and Mike is horrified to realize that he can see the back of the couch through his body. He’s literally disappearing, and Mike lets out a yell and reaches for him without thinking. He yells again when his hand passes right through him, and Will opens his eyes, flickering back into existence.

“See?” he says, sounding tired and small and very scared.

Mike can relate. He himself feels nearly sick with a combination of

worry and terror. "We should tell Hopper."

"No," Will shakes his head hard. "He'll think I'm crazy."

"He won't think you're crazy," Mike says. "Not when he sees. And he knows about the Upside Down. He—"

"If we tell him, he'll tell my mom, and I don't...I've put her through enough. And what if he tells someone else? Someone from the lab? They'll take me away, do tests on me like they did El. Lock me up somewhere. I think I'd go even crazier if they did that."

A tear slips from one of Will's eyes. He wipes it away quickly, looking embarrassed, and without thinking about it Mike slides across the couch and slings an arm around him. Will stiffens for a second, then relaxes into him. He's still shaking, and Mike tightens his hold. His stomach gives a small twist but he ignores it. Tells himself that now is not the time to be thinking about food and lets it go, although it doesn't exactly feel like hunger. He nods for Will to keep talking. "We're trying to figure out a way to stop it. I'm getting better at keeping myself from going there when I'm awake but something keeps pulling me back when I'm sleeping. I've been trying to keep myself from sleeping but I'm not very good at it." He twists his hands in his lap. "I fell asleep during class the other day and started to disappear. El saw. I don't think that anyone else did, though."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's supposed to be over. El closed the gate and everything is supposed to go back to normal. I didn't want you to worry."

Mike shakes his head. "I've *been* worried. I knew something was wrong."

Will gives him a smile. It's small, but real. "You thought I liked El."

Mike squirms. "Only at first. That's not the point. The point is you need to tell me this kind of stuff so I can help you fix it. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good. We're gonna figure this out. You're not alone. It's gonna be



okay.”

Will nods. He makes as if to pull away but Mike holds on and he subsides. He knows that they will have to move eventually; that despite what Will says they will have to tell someone, try to figure this out. But not right now. Right now what they both need more than anything is some comfort, and even if it is a bit weird (but it's not. It's not weird and maybe that's the weirdest thing of all) it's working, and Mike isn't letting go until he feels steady.

They stay like that until his mom calls them up for dinner.

**Author's Note:**

Thank you for reading!